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RHMFISS/HQ USEUCOM VAIHINGEN GE PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L ABUJA 000686

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/25/2006

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SUBJECT: NIGERIA: CONCERNS BY PEOPLES DEMOCRATIC PARTY
ON THIRD TERM FOR PRESIDENT OBASANJO

Classified by Ambassador John Campbell for reasons 1.5
(b),(d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Chief Ojo Maduekwe, National Secretary of President Obasanjo's ruling Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), is concerned that amendment of the constitution will lack popular legitimacy -- even if it is done legally. He was ambiguous about the desirability of President Obasanjo seeking a third term, even if an amended constitution should permit him to run. End summary.

¶2. (C) Ojo Maduekwe, selected last year by President Obasanjo to head the PDP, met with the Ambassador on March 22 to discuss constitutional issues. He has long supported revision of the constitution -- his National Day Lecture, sponsored by the President in 2005, devoted significant attention to issues of Nigerian state building and related constitutional issues. But, he said, the current focus on term limits and whether President Obasanjo would seek to remain in office had utterly distorted an opportunity for a nation-wide constitutional debate. Because of the confluence of constitutional revision and speculation about the President's future, he continued, constitutional amendment, even if it followed the legal requirements, would lack popular legitimacy. Paradoxically, changing the constitution would thereby weaken the state and democratic institutions, rather than strengthening them.

¶3. (C) Maduekwe opined that even if an amended constitution permitted it, it was by no means certain that the President would run for a third term. He referred to the President's religious devotion. The Ambassador recalled that in a previous conversation, Maduekwe said he thought that the President's "moral compass" would keep him from attempting to remain in power after 2007. Maduekwe said he still hoped so. But, he continued, there is also an important "messianic" dimension to the President's self-image -- he really believes that he was saved from death under Abacha by divine providence to lead the Nigerian people. Maduekwe said he hoped the "moral compass" side of Obasanjo's personality would outweigh the "Messianic" side.

¶4. (C) The Ambassador observed that the argument he often heard for a third term was to allow the President time to solidify his economic reform program and his anti-corruption campaign. Maduekwe said those were the wrong arguments. In a country as large as Nigeria, there are plenty of potential political leaders who could build

on Obasanjo's positive accomplishments. Instead, he continued, the argument for a third term should start from an acknowledgement of a presidential failure to promote an orderly civilian presidential succession. President Obasanjo should acknowledge that his selection twice of Atiku Abubakar as his Vice Presidential running mate and likely successor had been a failure. The Vice President had demonstrated his unworthiness for the highest office in the land because of his corruption. So, the President needed a third term to get the succession right.

15. (C) Maduekwe, who was Minister of Transport in the first Obasanjo administration, has served as the President's personal lawyer and constitutional advisor. Yet, he said that he is no longer in the President's most inner circle -- pushed out by those at the Villa who have their own agendas. They hold the President "hostage," Maduekwe said. Maduekwe said that those around the President (whom he did not identify) dismiss him as an "intellectual who is unwilling to get his hands dirty." Maduekwe said he was worried about the President's international reputation should he run again. And, he continued, he was concerned about his own reputation in those circumstances because he has been so close to the President.

16. (C) Comment: Maduekwe is clearly chagrined at having been shoved aside at the Villa. He indicated that he had never really believed that the President would seek to prolong his stay in office. Now that prolongation in office appears to be a possibility, Maduekwe's rationalization appears to be that if the President does seek a third term, it is because he is held "hostage" by Villa denizens (presumably the same who have shoved Maduekwe aside) or, alternatively, even if the

constitution is amended to eliminate term limits, that the President's "moral compass" may yet cause him not to stand.

17. (C) Comment, continued: A successful lawyer, Maduekwe is regarded as a trimmer by his critics. One of Atiku's supporters recently observed to the Ambassador that the PDP National Secretary "had a spring where his backbone is supposed to be." Formerly a human rights activist, he flirted with the Abacha regime with hopes to be made Ambassador to Washington. His friendship with, and personal concern for, President Obasanjo appears genuine. So, too, is his concern about the consequences of a third term bid.

CAMPBELL